



NEWS RELEASE

EUROPE REGIONAL MEDICAL COMMAND PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE

CMR. 442 APO AE 09042
U.S. ARMY HOSPITAL – NACHRICHTEN KASERNE
POSTFACH 103180 69021 HEIDELBERG, GERMANY
DSN 371-3317/3049 TEL. 06221-17-3317/3049
JERI CHAPPELLE CELL – 0162-270-0456

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Oh my aching head: The pain and suffering of migraines

By Staff Sgt. Kelly Bridgwater
Europe Regional Medical Command Public Affairs

HEIDELBERG, Germany – Kit York, an MRI technician assistant working at Landstuhl, suffered with headaches and migraines since her early teens, but at age 40, she found relief from her constant suffering; Kit, like many of us, wondered why she suffered from headaches in the first place.

“That’s the \$64,000 question,” said Col. Barbara Joslow, a neurologist at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. “Everyone is susceptible to headaches,” she said. “I challenge you to find someone who hasn’t had one of some sort.”

A headache can be as simple as a brief pain in the head or a sign of something more serious like head trauma, infections, or other disorders. In general, recurring headaches that are not part of a disease process are referred to as headache disorders. Joslow said there are many different types of headaches.

“I find it easiest to divide headaches into vascular (these include migraines, inflammatory illnesses affecting blood vessels, and aneurysm) and non-vascular (such as tension, tumor and pseudo-tumor) headaches,” the doctor said. “Within each sub-type, especially the migraine, there are a number of variants.”

York doesn’t know what caused her migraines, but her constant pain prompted her to seek help.

“I had headaches nearly everyday,” said York. “No exaggeration, headaches with migraines mixed in. Until I started seeing Dr. Joslow my life included many doctor and emergency room visits. Along with those visits came a number of medications to include the dreaded narcotics.” York said she tried many medications over the years, but in the end, it took a combination of medications to help relieve her migraines.

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Europe Regional Medical Command

Oh my aching head: The pain and suffering of migraines 2-2-2

York credits family support, having a good relationship with her doctor, and finding the right medications. She said a breast reduction also contributed to helping her lessen the pain in her head.

“Dr. Joslow helped me get a breast reduction to relieve the strain on my neck and back. I do want women with heavy chests to know that there is an option for the pain that comes from the weight they carry.” York still experiences migraines and uses a combination of medications to keep them at bay.

“Doctor Joslow put me on a regiment of medicines that I take daily as a treatment to keep migraines away,” said York. “We had to tweak the amounts a few times to get it right but once we did we brought my migraines down from about two or three per week to two or three per month.”

Sometimes it is difficult to tell the difference between a migraine, a minor headache, and a pain in the head that is the symptom of a more serious condition or disease.

“To me, a migraine is a headache that is accompanied by symptoms that include sensitivity to light, noise and smells or even nausea and vomiting,” said Joslow. “Most patients will feel best when they lay down in a cold, dark room. If they fall asleep, that helps as well.”

Doctors have yet to identify a single cause of migraine headaches.

“Migraines may be caused due to family history, food additives, menstrual cycles, stress, sleep deprivation, and poor nutrition,” said the neurologist. “You also have to take a careful history of the patient’s headaches to determine the type and their cause. You can ask a patient what triggers their episode, how long the headache lasts and things that are known to make it worse or better such as medications.”

You know when you have a headache. But do you know when to take care of it yourself or to get help?

“Depending on the cause of the headache, sometimes removing the irritant (like alcohol for a hangover headache or strong perfume odors for a migraine) can result in effective treatment,” said Joslow. “Treatment can vary from purchasing over the counter medications to prescribing daily medication as a preventive. Treatment is tailored to each patient depending on lifestyle, side effects, and the type of headache.”

Joslow said the time to be concerned is when you experience a sudden onset of the worst headache of your life, a thunderclap headache. “This needs to be evaluated immediately in an emergency room,” she said. “Individuals should also visit the emergency room when a headache will not go away and it is interrupting their ability to keep fluids in their body, or if they are experiencing speech problems, weakness or loss of consciousness.”

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Europe Regional Medical Command

Oh my aching head: The pain and suffering of migraines 3-3-3

Self-awareness of your health condition and knowing your body's response to pain are important factors in managing headaches.

“Treatment of headache or migraine requires active engagement of both the provider and the patient,” stressed Joslow. “Individuals must take ownership of their condition and be willing to make changes in their habits to effect change.”

“There is no magic pill, bullet, or incantation that will cure headaches,” said Joslow. “Providers must be willing to work with their patients in a step-wise logical progression to decrease the frequency and, or severity of the headaches and improve quality of life.”